



GEOTECHNICAL ENGINEER EXAMINATION

**CALIFORNIA BOARD FOR
PROFESSIONAL ENGINEERS AND
LAND SURVEYORS**

**Information
for
Examinees**

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Examination Information and Administration

Introduction

The mission of the Board for Professional Engineers and Land Surveyors is to safeguard the public from incompetent practice. As set forth in the Professional Engineers License Act, the Board is mandated by the State Legislature to test all applicants for licensure as Geotechnical Engineers on their ability to apply his or her knowledge and experience and to assume responsible charge in the professional practice of geotechnical engineering. The Board accomplishes this mandate by setting forth examination standards to reliably determine those applicants who are competent to provide safe services to the public.

This brochure provides information specific to the California Geotechnical Engineering Examination. The Geotechnical Engineering Examination consists of an 8-hour examination administered in one day. Applicants for licensure as a Geotechnical Engineer must hold a current and valid California license as a Civil Engineer and pass the California Geotechnical Engineering Examination to become a “Geotechnical Engineer” in California. The Board recommends retaining this brochure for future reference.

Examination Description

The California Geotechnical Engineering Examination is comprised of approximately 45% multiple-choice and 55% design/essay type questions. Candidates will record their answers to multiple-choice items on a machine-scoreable answer sheet. Calculations needed to solve a multiple-choice item **must** be performed in the multiple-choice test booklet. Candidates are provided individual solution booklets for each design problem. A candidate’s solutions and answers to a design problem must be included in the designated solution booklet to be graded. Candidates will be allotted four hours to complete the morning (a.m.) portion and four hours to complete the afternoon (p.m.) portion. The morning session will consist only of multiple-choice problems and the afternoon session will consist only of design problems.

The subject matter of the Geotechnical Engineering Examination relates to the principles and practice of geotechnical engineering. Candidates are tested on elements of current geotechnical engineering practice as dictated by an occupational analysis. The candidate’s knowledge of geotechnical engineering principles, method of solving the problems, and reasoning ability as demonstrated in the candidate’s solutions for design problems will be tested. Candidates should develop solutions with calculations, findings, and statements arranged in a professional, organized, and legible manner. A definition of key words used in the design/essay problems on the exam is provided in Appendix B.

The specific content of the examination is reflected in the California Geotechnical Engineering Examination Test Plan (See Appendix A) which was updated in December 2001.

Review Courses

The Board does not endorse any review course or material provided as study aides. If you are interested in obtaining information on review courses, we suggest you contact your local university or professional engineering society.

Grading Process for Design/Essay Questions

Design/essay problems are solved through calculations, written answers, and graphic presentations completed by the candidate in designated solution booklets. Each design solution completed by a candidate is graded independently by at least two licensed Geotechnical Engineers. Discrepancies in the two graders' findings are resolved through further grading by a third engineer. Solutions are graded without knowledge of the candidate's name or the scores assigned by other graders.

Graders are trained to apply explicitly established scoring criteria and performance standards for each design problem and solution. The scoring criteria and grading plans are developed by licensed Geotechnical Engineers in conjunction with the development of the design items. The grading plans, like the items, are based on the current test plan. Points are assigned to the problems, and to the grading elements¹ within problems, according to their weight as designated by the test plan. The predetermined point values are awarded for each grading element correctly addressed in a candidate's solution booklet. Partial credit for a grading element is not allowed.

To maximize method points, candidates must show all work, including all formulas and calculations when specified and cite references where specified. Reference must include title, author, edition/date, page and figure number, if applicable. Acceptable references are those included on the 2003 Geotechnical Reference List (Appendix C), legal statutes or published material relating to the practice of California Geotechnical engineering. Class notes, tapes or other unaccredited, unpublished materials are **not** acceptable citations.

Some problems may require a specified number of answers. Candidates must provide **only** the number of answers required. Any answers provided beyond the number required will **not** be graded. To maximize answer points, avoid duplication in the answers. To obtain credit, candidates must also provide explanations/justifications for each answer when requested.

Grading Process for Multiple Choice Questions

Candidates use a machine-scoreable answer sheet to record their answers to the multiple choice items of the examination, which is then scanned for scoring. Candidates do not receive credit for a question if they marked more than one answer, if they do not mark an answer, or if they mark an incorrect answer.

The point value of each multiple choice question will be printed in the test booklet as an aid to the candidate. However, after initial scoring, any question that does not meet statistical criteria, or that is found to have a content problem, may be deleted.

In the event of deletion, the point value of the deleted question either becomes zero for all candidates or points will be awarded to all candidates. In this way, no candidate's score is affected by a deleted question.

Examination Appeals

Candidates who fail the examination and are **within 15% of the passing score** may appeal their performance on **design problems only**. Multiple-choice items may not be appealed. Candidates must review their examination to appeal their results. Dates, times, and locations for review/appeal sessions will be determined by the Board and this information will be included with the result notices for failing candidates.

Within twenty-one days from the date of the result notice, candidates must submit their request to review/appeal and the appropriate review/appeal fee. At the review/appeal session, examinees will be given a copy of the examination problems, their own solutions, and a copy of the scoring report.

The scoring report **will not** include solutions to the problem, but will identify the elements within a problem requirement for which points are assigned, and possible point values of each element.

Appeals must be submitted on the appeal forms issued at the review/appeal session at or before the time the review/appeal session concludes.

An appeal must contain a comprehensive, coherent, and plausible explanation of how and why the original response to the problem is correct in order to be forwarded for regrading. New or additional information will not be considered. Only an explanation regarding the original response provided during the examination will be considered. Appeals that do not meet the Board's established criteria for regrading will be denied.

Appellants who have not received their appeal results by the final filing date of the next examination and who wish to take the subsequent examination will be required to submit a refile application. There will be no extension of the final filing date granted.

Appellants who obtain their licensure on appeal will be refunded their appeal fee.

Candidates who attend the subsequent examination while waiting on their appeal results will **not** receive a refund. Candidates who **do not** wish to attend the subsequent examination after submitting their refile fee, must request a postponement (according to the guidelines outlined in Board Rule 446) or they will forfeit their refile fee.

¹A grading element may be the correct identification of a problem data or criteria, a correct equation or formula, a correct reference, or some other component of the problem requirement.

Examination Development Information

Licensed Geotechnical Engineers with content expertise and exam development experience participate in the development of an examination that meets the highest standards for exam construction and which is a reliable measure of geotechnical engineering practice. The following is an overview of the examination development process.

Test Plan

The test plan for a licensing examination is the vital link between the test and professional practice. It defines the content of the examination by identifying the subject-matter areas to be covered and by establishing the relative emphasis each content area should be given. Test plans are developed based upon the results of a job or occupational analysis. Typically, an occupational analysis is conducted every five to seven years and test plans are updated accordingly to ensure that they reflect actual tasks performed by licensed Geotechnical Engineers.

In 2001, an occupational analysis was conducted for Geotechnical Engineers. A committee consisting of a diverse group of California-licensed Geotechnical Engineers developed a survey consisting of statements describing the tasks and knowledge related to competent entry-level geotechnical engineering practice. This survey was distributed to all of the approximately 1,044 California-licensed Geotechnical Engineers residing in the state. The survey respondents' ratings were analyzed and used to develop the new Geotechnical Engineer Examination Test Plan. The first examination developed under the new test plan was administered in October 2002.

Examination Development Processes

Examination Development Conference

The Examination Development Committee, comprised of licensed Geotechnical Engineers, convenes to review the test plan and outline the development of a new examination. Through the review of performance data for previously used items, the committee develops new items and selects and revises items from the existing item bank for inclusion in the new examination. Grading plans are developed or revised to be used in the scoring of the examination.

Examination Review/Weighting Conference

The Examination Development Committee reconvenes as a group to review and refine items selected and developed for the new examination, to further develop grading plans and to assess the adequacy of time allotted to complete the exam. The committee assigns point values to each item and ensures that all test plan areas are appropriately covered on the exam.

Field Testing/Board Review

Newly licensed Geotechnical Engineers are recruited to take a draft version of the newly written examination under simulated test conditions. After completing each item, the

field testers answer a set of questions about each item's clarity, difficulty, importance, and the time needed to answer. The field testers then respond to a questionnaire about the overall exam content, any subject areas that should have been covered but were not, and any areas that were covered but were unnecessary or overemphasized. Field testers are also asked about the adequacy of time, depth and difficulty of the Geotechnical Engineering Examination Field Test compared with the one that they passed.

This critical phase of the examination review process may reveal ambiguities in the wording of an item, elicit an acceptable alternate response, disclose unanticipated response patterns, or address time issues. Any of these may require further refinement of the item before the exam is finalized.

Setting a Pass/Fail Standard

Because each examination is considered independent of any previous administration and levels of examination difficulty may vary, the Board adopts a criterion-referenced passing score. A criterion-referenced passing score applies minimum standards for competent practice to all candidates regardless of the form of the examination administered.

A group of licensed Geotechnical Engineers representing a demographic diversity of the geotechnical engineering profession convenes after the examination is administered and graded to determine the pass/fail standard for the examination.

In general, a modified-Angoff method is used for multiple-choice questions and a pass/fail method is used for the design/essay questions. The Angoff procedure requires the Geotechnical Engineers (the judges) to estimate the proportion of borderline candidates who would answer each item correctly.

The pass/fail standard for the exam is obtained by averaging all of the judges' ratings. The overall pass/fail standard is obtained by summing the results of each test section (multiple choice and design/essay).

The pass/fail standard is established to distinguish between those candidates whose performance equals or betters the requirement for minimum acceptable competence in the area of geotechnical engineering. The concept of "minimum acceptable competence" is defined at each standard setting meeting to ensure that participants have a common frame of reference for assessing minimum competence for the entry-level geotechnical engineer.

Throughout the entire cycle of examination development and grading, numerous licensed Geotechnical Engineers review the examination. This exposure helps to ensure the validity and reliability of the examination and the discovery of any flaws that may exist in an examination before it is administered.

Levels of Item Complexity

There are four levels of thought processes that can be applied in constructing test items. They are, in order of increasing level of complexity: knowledge, comprehension, application, and analysis. A description of each level follows:

Knowledge-Level Requirements – Knowledge-level items require that candidates remember information that they have previously learned. The key feature of this type of item is that the candidate need only recall information and indicate the correct choice. Because professional practice entails much more than the recall of information, it is recommended that items be developed to test competencies above this level.

Comprehension-Level Requirements – Comprehension-level items require the candidate to demonstrate an understanding of information. This can be done by requiring the candidate to identify a concept or a principle that is presented in the item by an indirect or implicit means, or by requiring the candidate to elaborate in his or her own words on the similarities, differences, and implications for practice with respect to a number of concepts or principles.

Application-Level Requirements – The application-level of testing goes another level beyond a candidate's ability to use knowledge in a given situation. It tests the candidate's ability to understand information and to demonstrate the correct use of this understanding in various situations.

Analysis-Level Requirements – Analysis-level items require the candidate to critically evaluate information, to identify and weigh the strengths and weaknesses of procedures, to interpret technical data and derive a conclusion, and entails an assessment of the implications of actions including the consideration of contingencies for failures or complications.

Candidates are required to demonstrate comprehension, to apply their knowledge, and to analyze situations whenever possible. Every effort is made to develop practice-related test problems at the higher cognitive levels (comprehension, application, and analysis) and to limit the number of knowledge-based items.